

# Transforming Theology

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*Incorporating Student Experience and Transformative Learning into Curriculum Design and Planning of Undergraduate Theological Degrees.*

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## Theological School: Warehouse or Birthing Centre?

Which metaphor better describes your theological school: a warehouse or a birthing centre? Is your school a repository of vast silos of knowledge, supplied by churches, theologians and publishers, where a student backs up a truck, fills it with drums of various sizes and substances, and graduates as a carrier who will deliver and drop off the acquired goods at various places along a subsequent journey? Or is it a place where an embryonically forming person is received by a group of specialists and others equipped to facilitate the growth of the embryo, who will graduate as a fully formed person (writ small) who has more growth to come, but who is well equipped to live successfully and healthily with a future role of engaging creatively and

generatively with people encountered in life and ministry? The teacher remains responsible for the conduct of the course, but at the same time engages the students more actively (and proactively) in the learning process.

The main change is a change of emphasis, with a de-emphasis on the comprehensiveness of disconnected content and an emphasis on mastery of content and processes and integration of learning across the curriculum.

The chief birthing centre resources are teachers who are learned (not limited to a set corpus), confident (to own personal positions but respect others), and humble (to learn with and from students): no special technical resources required.

*From Warehouse to Birthing Centre*

While evolving from a warehouse model to a birthing centre model requires no change in the essential content of a program, it does require a restructuring of a course according to the developmental criterion of skills and personal growth rather than coverage of traditional blocks of content. It will thus embody the concept of the course as a part of a learning and theological continuum rather than a “starting from scratch catch-all” program.

It will also require a radical change in style from teacher-driven content delivery to student-centred content reception and processing.

## From the Research: The April Workshop

### **Transformative Learning and Student Experience**

- Over years students change: does the curriculum change with this, or does the faculty work from an 'ideal' student which the curriculum seems to fit? This ideal student is a faculty creation, not related to the actual reality of current students.
- The imagination of the college: a movement away from seeing the college as central, but from the student perspective as just one of many parts that make up a student's life: student as central, not the college.

### **Transformative Learning and Graduate Experience**

- Obtain graduate input in course reviews, Academic Boards, advisory committees.
- Student interviews at beginning and end of course and 12 months after graduation.
- More effective integration of college learning and church life is desired.

### **Transformative Learning and Stakeholders**

- Both stakeholders and colleges need more accurately to define their aims and needs, especially regarding the transformative aspects and the formative aspects.
- Stakeholders often stipulate ordination requirements in general terms, but prescription of actual content of units is not stipulated: varied scope of units across colleges.

### **Transformative Learning and Curriculum Design**

- Transformative Learning involves integration across/between academic disciplines and within each individual student.
- The principles and practices of Practical Theology (eg reflection on practice) have much to offer as we consider transforming the curriculum towards Transformative Learning.
- Capstone units are an important aspect of Transformative Learning.

### **Transformative Learning and Teaching**

- Take students beyond classroom, but bring results back to the classroom and evaluate.
- Transformative learning in a particular unit must lead to/build upon previous/further learning, rather than take place in an isolated series of units.
- The teacher is there to structure knowledge, not to be a fount of information.
- The teacher presents as both Character (as a model of formation) and Learner (as a model of learning).

### **Transformative Learning and Online/Distance Education**

- People need a sense of community: the need to engage with each other is critical. The greatest risk to online/distance is the lack of interaction from online/distance students.
- A dedicated lecturer needs consistent contact with students throughout the program.
- The American Theological Schools "measure" transformative learning by: a pre-study assessment of a student; ongoing dialogue with the student; logging progress with journals etc. It is usually a model employed by colleges with small student numbers.

## *Comments from the Workshop*

### *Academic Board Chair*

Since your visit to us last year, I have instituted a process where, at each of our Academic Board meetings, one of the four Heads of School brings a one hour presentation to the Board on how transformative learning is being implemented in their school. The four papers will be published and I will send you a set for your inclusion in your overall findings.

### *Head of (non-Theology) School*

Thanks for the (workshop) day. When I arrived this morning, I was somewhat sceptical. Now, I'm going away as a believer.

### *Head of Ministry School*

Those two principles you presented of "accommodation" and "assimilation" in response to new knowledge are extremely helpful. I will seriously work on implementing that pattern in my teaching. But I don't think I will be able to master it all before I teach next.

(Response: Probably not, but you will be able to master it *while* you teach next.)

### *Theological College Principal*

Thank you for the Workshop notes and slides. They will help in the process of digesting the fruits of a very profitable day last Friday. It has certainly given me things to think about, and some ideas for how (we) can develop in the future. I think it may well become a topic at our mid-year staff in-service day.

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